



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service (EAS)

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees*

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Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. I referred two employees to EAS, individually, to work out their personality differences, which were becoming disruptive. It's been weeks, but I don't see much improvement. If I discipline these employees, will it interfere with the EAP's work? Should I ask the EAP?

A. If you believe it is necessary and appropriate to respond to these employees' continuing conduct problems with a disciplinary action, do not be inhibited by concern over whether the EAP's work will be adversely affected. To do so would risk violation of a key principle in the operation of employee assistance programs - that they not interfere with management and administrative functions. Likewise, an EAP would violate this principle if it made attempts to thwart an administrative decision or advised you with regard to your decision. Wrong advice would diminish your trust of your EA Professional in helping you manage troubled employees in the future. Your employees have not chosen to change their behavior. You now must decide what to do about it. Your initial decision to take a "wait and see" approach after the EAP referral is reasonable, but you are not expected to tolerate ongoing conduct or performance problems.

■ Q. I have an employee who demands my attention to her every discomfort, including noise and temperature complaints, furniture problems, supply issues, air quality issues, coworkers' colognes, and more. She is an long-term, skilled worker. What can I do?

A. The behavior of your employee may be annoying, but are you able to document it as disruptive to business or in other ways costly to your work unit or its productivity? For example, is it necessary for your administrative staff to spend significant amounts of time responding to her complaints and needs? Your task is to decide how to distinguish important complaints from those that are unworthy of serious attention. Some of these complaints may be legitimate and merit attention. For example, they could be justified by medical circumstances that obligate you to accommodate them. Others, however, may be frivolous and disruptive to the flow of business or services. After attempting to clarify with the employee, consulting and coordinating with your manager or human resources expert would be advised before engaging in any strategy to address or correct her behavior. Documentation will be important, and making an EAP referral when it becomes appropriate may be helpful.

■ Q. One of my employee's hands shake in the morning during our staff meetings. Although no one has inquired as to the cause, it is very distracting. I think it could be a medical problem, but some of us think the employee has a drinking problem. How should I respond?

A. Because the shaking disrupts your meeting, it is appropriate to let your employee know it. Consider doing this in a private and supportive way. Do not presume that alcoholism or another medical diagnosis explains the shaking. Do not ask your employee diagnostic questions. Your employee may or may not offer an explanation, but you can recommend the EAP based upon the disruptive effect of the shaking during your staff meetings. The EAP will be able to interview your employee confidentially and possibly discover the cause or refer to a source of help that can do so. If your employee does disclose a medical explanation, follow your organization's procedures or advice with regard to how it can be accommodated.

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■ Q. An employee says she is being "bullied" by a coworker and is becoming depressed. I have never seen the coworker acting inappropriately. How seriously should I take her complaint? Could this just be two personalities not getting along?

A. A complaint of deliberate, hurtful mistreatment by a coworker toward another is enough to justify your investigation and intervention. The employee's complaint about depression related to bullying is also cause for concern and needs to be taken seriously. Bullying behavior can occur at work just as it does on a playground, and an authority figure may be the last one to witness it. Bullying can lower morale and affect productivity, and the psychological harm can be as real as a physical injury. Bullied employees are particularly prone to absenteeism to gain relief. Take claims of bullying seriously to show employees that abusive behavior will not be tolerated. As with sexual harassment, or acts of physical violence, both the perpetrator and the victim of bullying can benefit from EAP services. Gather the facts and respond accordingly. After you confront the bullying employee, be careful to guard against the bully's attempts to retaliate against the complainant.

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■ Q. I understand that if an employee does not correct a performance or conduct problem an EAP referral is appropriate. But aren't some problems, say, too much chatting with friends on the phone during work hours, inappropriate for an EAP referral?

A. It may appear that some performance and conduct issues are outside the scope of EAP intervention, but coming to this conclusion means you have decided no personal problem could possibly exist. This entails diagnosing what the problem is or isn't, which is something supervisors should avoid. For example, an employee who appears to be socializing excessively on the phone during the day, despite being warned or confronted by you, obviously is not influenced by the possible consequences. Why? A range of explanations may exist, but you are unable to examine them. Problems at home, relationship issues, boredom, immaturity, marital problems, or emotional problems could explain the disregard of your insistence that the employee stop the behavior. EAP intervention can be effective with any of these issues. And, if you do eventually take formal action, it is important to have given your employee options for making change, including a referral to the EAP.

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**NOTES:**

Visit EAS on our website at:  
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